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The Origin of the Ravines in the Prairies.

By Amos Sawyer, M. D., Hillsboro, Illinois.

In 1874 I sent this paper to the Academy of Science at St. Louis, where it was read and incorporated in the minutes. My purpose was to record my observations upon this subject, as I do not remember to have seen it mentioned in any of your transactions. To the present generation it may be of little interest, as they know; or, if curious, can be informed by those who have witnessed the change, how most of the ravines in the prairies originated. But a century hence, should the question be asked, it would prove to be a problem not easily or satisfactorily solved, unless there should be accessible some authentically recorded account of their origin. I, therefore, call your attention to the subject.

The prairie situated one mile east of Hillsboro, Illinois, during the wet season could only be said to be an immense shallow lake, interspersed with islands; for the tough sod, together with the rank growth of grass, reeds and flags, offered a barrier to the rapid flow of the water during the spring and summer floods, as it had to filter through the roots of the grass or percolate the drifts of the broken and decaying vegetation which always line the shores of the prairie lakes, to again encounter the surface of the tough native sod in its struggle to reach the fluids' goal. Its progress necessarily was so slow that it did not attain sufficient velocity to cause a washing of the soil, but caused the water to spread over a large area of land, requiring weeks to discharge the same volume which now passes off in forty-eight hours.

The ravine change was wrought in this way: After the 1st of June until quite late in the summer, the prairies swarmed with green-head flies, and so fierce were their attacks and so poisonous their bite that after eight in the morning all animals were driven to the woods or some friendly smoke, built for their protection by their owners. Nor did they dare to return to their feeding ground until just before sunset, when they would emerge from their retreats and single file march through the long grass to the nearest pond for water and to their feeding ground; each neighbor's cattle having their own path, pond and feeding ground. This constant passing to and fro from the pond killed the grass and broke up the sod in the path, and when this was on an incline and the spring rains came, the cow path being lower, the water poured down these cow-path channels and in time cut a ravine, which eventually cut a channel of size and importance, enough where it crossed a public highway, to require bridging.

No doubt many of these water courses owe their origin to buffalo paths cut in the same way.

In conclusion, I will say that I have watched quite a number of the cow-path streams from their inception to the present day—a period of over seventy years—and the size they have attained during this time would astonish anyone after becoming acquainted with their history.